



## Coast Guard HR Flag Voice 116

### CREATING THE EXCEPTIONAL WORKPLACE -- BUILDING A "**STRENGTH-BASED**" ORGANIZATION (PART 10)

#### **The Third Key: Focus on Strengths Let Them Become More of Who They Already Are**

"How do great managers release each person's potential?"

You have your people and they have their goals (outcomes). What should you do now? What should you do to speed each person's progress toward performance?

**Great managers would offer you this advice: Focus on each person's strengths and manage around his/her weaknesses. Don't try to fix the weaknesses. Don't try to perfect each person. Instead, do everything you can to help each person cultivate his talents. Help each person become more and more of who he already is.**

This radical approach is fueled by one, simple insight: Each person is different. Each person has a unique set of talents, a unique pattern of behaviors, of passions, of yearnings. Each person's pattern of talents is enduring. Each person, therefore, has a unique destiny.

Unfortunately, this insight is lost on many managers. They are ill at ease with individual differences, preferring the blanket security of generalizations. When working with their people, they are guided by the sweep of their opinion that, for example, "Most salespeople are ego-driven" or "Most accountants are shy."

In contrast, great managers are impatient with the clumsiness of these generalizations. They know that generalizations obscure the truth: that all engineers are different, that all procurement specialists are different, that each individual, no matter what his chosen profession, is unique. Yes, the best boat drivers share some of the same talents. But even among the elite, the Michael Jordans of boat drivers, their differences will outweigh their similarities. Each person will have his distinct sources of motivation and a style of persuasion all his own.

This rampant individuality fascinates great managers. They are drawn to the subtle but significant differences between people, even those engaged in the same line of work. They know that a person's identity, his uniqueness, lies not just in what he does -- his profession -- but in how he does it -- his style.

The founder of a capital equipment rental company, describes two unit managers, one who is a terrific salesperson, networking the neighborhood, joining local business or community groups, literally wooing customers into the fold. The other is an extraordinary asset manager, who squeezes life out of every piece of machinery by running the most efficient workshop in the company. Both of them excel at their role.

A school superintendent, manages two exemplary school principals. The first principal is, what he calls, a "reflective practitioner." He consumes libraries of journals, stays current with educational theory and teaches others what he has learned. The second operates exclusively out of a sense of mission and a natural instinct for teaching. There is no educational jargon in her school; just boundless energy and a passion for learning, however it happens.

One of the signs of great managers is that they can describe, in detail, the unique talents of each of their people -- what drives each one, how each one thinks, how each build relationships. In a sense, these managers are akin to great novelists. Each of the "characters" they manage is vivid and distinct. Each has his own features and foibles. And their goal, with every employee, is to help each individual "character" play out his unique role to the fullest.

Their distrust of generalizations extends all the way to the broader categories of race and sex. Of course, great managers admit that your cultural influences will shape some of your perspectives, giving you something in common with those who shared those influences. An affluent, white female living in Greenwich, Connecticut might have a more benign view of the world than, say, a young Hispanic male growing up in Compton, California. But, in their view, these kinds of differences are too broad and too bland to be of much help. It would be more powerful to understand the Striving talents of this particular white female, or the Relating talents of that particular Hispanic male. Only then could you know how to help each of them turn his talents into performance. Only then could you help each one live out his individual specialness. For great managers the most interesting and the most powerful differences are between people, not peoples.

This is a grand perspective, with far-reaching implications, but, to hear great managers describe it, it's just common sense. Here's Mandy M, a manager of a twenty-five person department: "I want to find what is special and unique about each person. If I can find what special thing they have to offer, and if I can help them see it, then they will keep digging for more."

A sales executive for a medical device company, describes it in even more pragmatic terms: "I deliberately look for something to like about each of my people. In one, I might like his sense of humor. In another, I might like the way he talks about his kids. In another, I'll enjoy her patience, or the way she handles pressure. Of course, there's a bunch of stuff about each of them that can get on my nerves. If I'm not deliberate about looking for what I like, the bad stuff might start coming to mind first."

For these and other great managers, finding the strengths of each person and then focusing on these strengths is a conscious act. It is the most efficient way to help people achieve their goals. It is the best

way to encourage people to take responsibility for who they really are. **And it is the only way to show respect for each person.** Focusing on strengths is the story line which explains all of their efforts as managers.

Next: The Fourth Key: Find the Right Fit

Regards, FL Ames

For more information about the research and book 'First Break All the Rules' please refer to web site <http://www.gallup.com/poll/managing/grtwrkplc.asp>

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